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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W PDAVIS
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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: PRESIDENT'S 2008 ANNUAL MESSAGE TO
LEGISLATURE

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. In her Annual Message to the Legislature January 28, President Sirleaf called corruption Liberia's "number one enemy" and asked the Legislature to pass the draft bills establishing the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Code of Conduct for Public Servants soon. She also asked the Governance Commission to recommend amendments to "modernize" the Constitution within the next two years. Sirleaf called the U.S. Liberia's "key (bilateral) partner" and repeatedly highlighted specific USG assistance. She said she felt "honored" to receive the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom and closed by welcoming President and Mrs. Bush's visit next month. The full text of the speech is available on the Executive Mansion's website at: www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/2007annual_msg.pdf. END SUMMARY.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF 2007

¶2. (U) In her second Annual Message to a special joint session of Congress on January 28, President Sirleaf reviewed the achievements of her Administration over the last year including the reconstruction and retraining of the Armed Forces of Liberia and the Liberian National Police; growth in agriculture, investment, banking, and mining; progress on debt relief and resolution of government arrears; and improved education, health care, and infrastructure. She thanked donors for their across-the-board support, and thanked the Legislature for its ratification of the Telecommunications Act, the Governance Commission Act, and an amendment to the Labor Practices Law.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA FOR 2008: FIGHT CORRUPTION

¶3. (U) President Sirleaf called corruption Liberia's "number one enemy" and vowed to prosecute any government official at any level for corrupt behavior. She asked the Congress to consider and pass several draft acts (that have already been submitted including the Investment and revised Revenue Codes) as soon as possible as they have "important implications for the resolution of the debt problem" and for attracting investment. She asked that the Legislature "give the Administration the teeth to deal with this evil" of corruption by passing the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, the Code of Conduct Act for Public Officials, the Act to Amend the Penal Law to classify all corruption as criminal, an act to limit the ability to transfer between budget lines, and an act to merge the Bureau of the Budget into the Ministry of Finance. (Note: The latter two are benchmarks for Liberia's post arrears clearance IMF program.)

UPCOMING INITIATIVES FOR 2008

14. (U) Sirleaf said she would submit during the present session several draft bills for consideration, including the National Defense Act, the Security Sector Reform Act, a draft amendment to the Act Establishing the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, a Freedom of Information Law, a Whistleblower Statute, and the creation of the Liberia Airport Authority. She noted she would also seek legislative approval for several concession agreements with foreign investors. She also said that as a courtesy, and in the spirit of cooperation, the Executive Branch would continue to forward concession agreements on oil exploration to Congress for its approval.

CONSTITUTION NEEDS TO BE "MODERNIZED"

15. (U) Sirleaf said it was time that the GOL modernize its Constitution to reflect the current practices of government. She called upon the Governance Commission to embark upon a thoughtful and fully consultative process to review the Constitution and make recommendations within the next two years. She suggested that amendments to the Constitution ought to include land reform, the election of county superintendents, mayors and other local officials, as well as reduction of the length of tenure of the office of the President, Vice President, and Members of the Legislature. She did not mention redefining the criteria for Liberian citizenship or land ownership. (Note: Only Liberian citizens can own land and only persons of the negro race can be Liberian citizens.)

GRATITUDE FOR U.S. ASSISTANCE TO LIBERIA

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16. (U) President Sirleaf called the United States Liberia's "key (bilateral) partner" and repeatedly listed the U.S. first in her acknowledgement of donor partners. She highlighted the USG work on infrastructure, particularly the renovation of the Capitol Building and the Temple of Justice. She also praised U.S. support on electricity, adding that it had allowed the power supply to reach two of Monrovia's suburbs, Congotown and Paynesville. Although she had high praise for the OPIC-funded Liberian Enterprise Development Finance Company, she mistakenly attributed the funding to a private U.S. citizen who is providing lending to operate the fund, rather than highlighting OPIC's contribution.

17. (U) Regarding education, Sirleaf thanked USAID for the launch of the Liberia Teacher Training Program and added that the return of the Peace Corps could further enhance this effort. She looked forward to more details about Liberia's inclusion in President Bush's International Education Initiative. She was also pleased that the American International School of Monrovia reopened and welcomed U.S. support to renovate part of the University of Liberia's Fendell campus.

18. (U) On health, the President lauded medical teams from five U.S. universities and the Mercy Ship who came to share their skills with Liberia last year. She cited as well the USG renovation of the Tubman National Institute for Medical Arts. She encouraged the agriculture sector to explore production of non-traditional crops that could be exported to the United States under Liberia's new AGOA eligibility. She also mentioned the Liberian Civil Aviation Authority's "Open Skies" Agreement concluded with the United States in February 2007.

19. (U) Finally, Sirleaf said that she felt "honored" and "privileged" to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bush as well as the Civil Rights Museum Award and the National Democratic Institute's Harriman Award. She closed the speech by asking all Liberians to help her welcome

President and Mrs. Bush to the country during their upcoming visit.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Sirleaf's 2008 Annual Message was a solid summary of the accomplishments and intentions of a dynamic administration working in a difficult post-conflict environment. The speech was well received, except for moments of awkward silence by some in the audience following the anti-corruption points. The passage of the Anti-Corruption Commission Act and a Code of Conduct Act for Public Officials is crucial to Liberia's efforts to reach the completion point of the Highly Indebted Poor Country debt clearance process. The Legislature appears to have made these bills a priority. President Sirleaf's emphasis on U.S. contributions to Liberia's reconstruction help set the stage for a warm welcome for President Bush. When she asked Liberians to join her in welcoming President and Mrs. Bush to Liberia, there was thunderous applause.
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